22 September 2005

Original: English

Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2005

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Enno **Drofenik** (Austria)

V. Translation and interpretation-related matters

A. Language service posts

1. At its 469th meeting, on 22 September 2005, the Committee on Conferences considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning the vacancy situation in language services posts (A/60/93, paras. 63-66), together with supplementary tables on the vacancy situation at the four duty stations updated as of 31 August 2005 and a chart on the use of short-term staff at the four duty stations from 1 January to 31 December 2004.

2. The Committee was informed that the demographic transition in the translation services continued to result in a high vacancy rate at Headquarters. The large number of retirements and the resulting influx of new staff had placed a heavy burden on training capacity and was bound to have an impact on overall productivity. The situation was more stable in Geneva and Vienna. Vacancies in both the translation and interpretation services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi continued to be a problem because successful candidates from the recent competitive examinations for language posts had been unwilling to accept assignments in Nairobi, particularly against extrabudgetary posts. During the videoconference held during the Committee's 467th meeting, on 21 September, the Committee learned that four of the six currently vacant posts in interpretation at Nairobi were expected to be filled by the beginning of 2006.

Discussion

3. Some representatives expressed cautious optimism about the prospects of improving the vacancy situation at Nairobi, but pointed out that the Secretariat should try harder to induce roster candidates to accept assignments at this duty station. It was important to ensure that the mobility initiative was sustained. A more

effective solution might be to conduct competitive examinations specifically for Nairobi, and to notify candidates before they registered for the examination that if they passed they would be assigned to Nairobi; the Group of Arab States had offered to assist in conducting such an examination for translators and interpreters into Arabic. It was pointed out that China had assisted in conducting competitive examinations for Chinese language staff.

4. The representative of the Secretariat said that the Department was working with the Office of Human Resources Management on the possibility of examinations for specific duty stations, Nairobi, for example.

5. Some delegations stressed that vacancy rates overall were far too high. The Secretariat should redouble its efforts to address the problem and it should plan ahead and advertise foreseeable vacancies. The representative of the Secretariat said that posting of jobs on Galaxy prior to the occurrence of the actual vacancies had already begun.

6. After reviewing information about short-term local and non-local recruitment, it was pointed out that cost savings should not be pursued at the expense of quality. The representative of the Secretariat stated that many local short-term staff were retirees who had a thorough knowledge of United Nations terminology and that quality was the paramount consideration.

7. Under the terms of the agreements with the International Association of Conference Translators and the International Association of Conference Interpreters, short-term staff members had the right to designate any professional domicile they wished. It was noted that some language services seemed to use far more non-local staff than others and that this may indicate unequal treatment. It was explained that temporary interpreters and translators were subject to the same rigorous testing as were regular recruits.

B. Informational meetings

8. At its 469th meeting, on 22 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences on informational meetings (ibid., paras. 67 and 68), which were held separately for each official language, to brief Member States on the terminology used and to consult with them on the improvement of the language services.

Discussion

9. Many delegations, stressing that quality was their main concern, expressed strong support for the holding of the informational meetings, which provided a chance for Member States to air problems in a frank exchange and for the Department to evaluate their satisfaction with the quality of conference services provided.

C. Rates of self-revision

10. At its 469th meeting, on 22 September, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences that concerned rates of self-revision (ibid., paras. 69-71). The Committee was informed that self-

revision rates for 2002, 2003 and 2004 were within the target percentage (45 per cent) approved by the General Assembly at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna and exceeded the target at Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Nairobi. For 2005 to date, the rate at Headquarters was 54 per cent. However, owing to the demographic transition in the Department, the ratio of revised translators to revisers was expected to shift in 2006, bringing the self-revision rate down, especially in the Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish services, where there had already been considerable turnover. The downside of that shift might be a lowering of productivity, given the influx of new recruits and the time that would be needed for their training.

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VII. Information technology

Introduction and overview

1. At its 468th meeting, on 21 September 2005, the Committee considered the section of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences concerning information technology (A/60/93, paras. 72-74).

Discussion

2. The view was expressed that the introduction of new information technology tools was not always wholly beneficial, as it sometimes entailed extra work and transferred some of the work to other staff groups. Some technological innovations, such as computer-assisted translation (CAT), could actually slow down the work process by creating new tasks, such as the building of translation memories. The Committee was given information about the pilot project on off-site translation, which had been initiated in January 2005. Although there were cost benefits associated with the use of off-site translators, there were also a number of disadvantages, including an increased workload for programming officers and front-office staff. Some delegations expressed the view that technical innovation should be introduced carefully and should respect the specific intellectual nature of the work carried out by language staff. It was agreed that although the cost factor was important, the paramount consideration should always be the quality of work produced. Moreover, new technologies should be subject to vigorous analysis before their introduction.

3. During a videoconference held at the Committee's 467th meeting, on 21 September, representatives of the conference services from the four duty stations expressed satisfaction with the reliability of the Electronic Meetings Planning and Resource Allocation System (eMeets) and the APG software for interpreter

assignment, which were both fully operational. The introduction of the two systems had improved the efficiency, timeliness and quality of services and planning. The management of conference servicing resources had also been improved by the capacity to produce up-to-date statistical and management reports. The progress achieved across duty stations in integrating information technology into management and documentation-processing systems among conference services at all duty stations was noted. The resulting increase in interaction, information exchange and resource-sharing among the four duty stations was also welcomed. Concern was expressed, however, at the apparent disparity in the allocation of resources for information technology. Owing to its relative lack of resources, Nairobi continued to rely on other duty stations to develop and maintain its information technology capacity. The situation in Nairobi should be improved as a matter of urgency, but not at the expense of other duty stations. In that regard, delegations welcomed the plan to create a P-3 information technology position within the Division of Conference Services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, but stressed that this alone would not resolve the situation. Member States would be monitoring the situation very closely.

4. Although each duty station clearly had its own specific requirements, the hope was expressed that the process of integrating the four conference-management systems would be continued with a view to establishing a truly global and integrated conference-management system. Some delegations also sought assurances that the increased transparency and accountability afforded by the new technologies was also being extended to external clients, such as regional and other major groupings. Concern was also expressed that new technologies did not always function in all six official languages of the United Nations and that information technology was more functional in certain languages than in others. Delegations stressed the importance of respecting the equality of the six official languages, as set forth in General Assembly resolution 59/265.

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Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Enno **Drofenik** (Austria)

VI. Other matters

1. At the 471st meeting, on 23 September 2005, the Chairman proposed that, since holding the Committee's substantive session in September required an exception to be made to General Assembly resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, and since many members had difficulty in attending in August, the Committee might consider holding its 2006 substantive session in June. Some delegations pointed out that a June date would considerably shorten the evaluation period on which the Secretariat was to report. It was decided that the Committee should take up the matter at its 2006 organizational session.

2. At the same meeting, the Committee considered a letter from the Chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities requesting the Committee's assistance in ensuring that delegates with disabilities could participate meaningfully and on an equal basis with others in the work of the Ad Hoc Committee. The Committee was addressed by the Secretary of the Ad Hoc Committee, who said that the most urgent need was for official documentation relating to the work of the Ad Hoc Committee to be made available in both electronic format and Braille. He also noted that Conference Room 4 was the only facility that could be adapted for access by some of the participants with disabilities. The Committee expressed support for meeting the needs of the persons with disabilities involved in the elaboration of the draft convention. It urged the Secretariat to ensure that the special requirements of the Ad Hoc Committee were taken into account in conference room scheduling and to explore ways of providing the required documentation in electronic form and Braille. Delegations felt that the Committee should recommend that the General Assembly consider, on a priority basis, the question, both in the particular case, in the light of additional information to be provided from the Secretariat on the resources needed to make available the

requested documentation in Braille, and in terms of the larger issue of the access of persons with disabilities to conference services.

3. Also at the 471st meeting, the question was raised of the biennialization by the General Assembly of the agenda item entitled "Pattern of conferences". No decision was taken because delegations could not agree whether the Committee had a mandate to consider the question at its current session.

4. At the same meeting, the question was raised of recommending annual consideration by the General Assembly of the agenda item entitled "Multilingualism". No decision was taken because delegations could not agree whether the Committee had a mandate to consider the question.

5. Also at the 471st meeting, in view of the difficulties encountered by some delegations during the negotiations on the outcome document of the 2005 High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly, Committee members expressed the view that, in future, care should be taken in the scheduling of conference rooms to make certain that their size was consistent with the anticipated attendance in order to promote transparency and ensure the safety of the participants.